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Pentagon bids for photos taken by French spacecraft

By Warren Strobel
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The Pentagon, which maintains its own fleet of highly sophisticated spy satellites, is negotiating to purchase detailed pictures of the Earth being taken by a civilian French spacecraft.

Sources said that at least three pictures from the craft, SPOT 1, will appear in the Defense Department's annual assessment of Soviet military strength, which the Pentagon is due to release today.

A Pentagon spokesman declined comment on the contents of "Soviet Military Power," saying only, "Anything that is used in the book will be given proper credit."

Multimillion-dollar negotiations for a steady supply of SPOT's photographs are being conducted by the Defense Mapping Agency, a little-known Pentagon unit that is the chief supplier of maps and related material to U.S. armed forces.

According to sources outside the government, DMA would act as a broker between SPOT and various federal organizations — including U.S. intelligence agencies — that would use the pictures.

That claim could not be confirmed through government officials.

"Mapping and intelligence, at that level, amount to the same thing," said Angelo Codevilla, a former Senate Intelligence Committee aide.

He said the SPOT data, like material from U.S. military satellites, probably would be forwarded to the National Photographic Interpretation Center in Washington for analysis and enhancement before being passed to the CIA, DMA and other agencies.

"We've been exploring utilization of SPOT images in preparation of maps and charts," said Del Malkie, a DMA spokesman.

"We've been discussing the possibility of SPOT support with operators of the system, but no contract has been signed," he said, declining to comment on intelligence matters.

Mr. Malkie and other officials would not disclose a dollar figure for the potential contract or say how far along the negotiations are.

SPOT Image Corp., the Boston-based firm that markets the spacecraft's pictures in the United States, declined to discuss the negotiations.

"We don't comment on our clients," a spokesman said.

The spacecraft, developed by the French space agency CNES, was launched in early 1986. It made its public debut during the Soviet nuclear accident at Chernobyl, when pictures of the smoking nuclear plant from SPOT and the U.S. Landsat craft were widely disseminated by the media.

The advent of SPOT and the 1984 commercialization of Landsat have brought detailed satellite images — once the preserve of intelligence officials — before the public with increasing frequency. The prospect of even more powerful commercial systems has, ironically, prompted concern from the Pentagon.

The 10,000-man DMA, which has long used Landsat data, provides maps for field commanders, guidance information for "smart"

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weapons and targeting data for nuclear missiles and other armaments.

"We are always interested in additional information," Mr. Malkie said. SPOT's sensors, he said, "give us some unique advantages in the identification of foliage or geology."

Remote-sensing satellites, civilian and military, do not actually photograph the earth. Instead they use a combination of sensors to create an image, which can be digitally transmitted, stored and manipulated.

SPOT has a resolution of 10 meters in black and white, meaning that an object 10 meters square or larger can be distinguished in the image. Landsat's resolution is 30 meters, while that of the CIA's KH-11 spacecraft is reputed to be about two inches.

Mr. Codevilla, now a senior research fellow at the conservative Hoover Institution, said U.S. reconnaissance satellites have been designed to gather as much detail as possible, limiting their ability to monitor wide areas.

"We have taken a vow of ignorance for most of the Soviet Union most of the time," he said. "For that kind of work, you don't need terribly high-quality imagery, but you need lots of it."

Mr. Codevilla also suggested that U.S. interest in the French satellite may have been prompted by last year's Challenger space shuttle accident and other launch failures, which have limited the nation's ability to launch satellites into orbit.